Information Manipulation & Organised Crime: Examining the Nexus[1]

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Summary[3]

The research paper that this briefing note summarises introduces a new framework for assessing the relationship between information manipulation and organised crime. Through applied real-world case studies from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova (Transnistria), and Albania, the framework reveals diverse patterns in these relationships, and the varying intensity of the information manipulation employed at a granular level. An emerging hypothesis emerging from the research suggests that authoritarian states may wield greater freedom in misusing information when they have intermediate – rather than high – levels of integration with the organised crime groups (OCG's) executing disinformation campaigns on their behalf.

The paper also identifies several areas for further research, including public receptivity to information manipulation, the mercurial nature of ties between elite actors and the use of information manipulation by elites, to create confusion amongst the public rather than to change their minds.

Introduction

Information manipulation has been a growing concern in recent years, particularly in relation to the disinformation tactics employed by authoritarian regimes. However, the role of nonstate actors (NSAs), including organised crime (OC) groups, in information manipulation (IM) has been largely overlooked. Given NSAs involvement in shaping international and domestic politics,[4] there is need for closer examination.

To address this gap, the research introduces a new conceptual framework for exploring the potential OC -IM nexus within the broader context of non-state actors, illicit finance, and transnational kleptocracy.

The framework examines the link between OC groups and state-connected actors in IM along two dimensions: (1) integration – to identify the level of cooperation, shared interests, or interdependence between OC groups and, (2) intensity – to assess the scale and impact of IM activities employed by OC groups and their collaboration with state actors.

Applied to real-world case studies from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova (Transnistria), and Albania, the framework reveals diverse patterns in these relationships, and in assessing the intensity of IM across different contexts. The research highlights several dimensions of interest, including: the changing opportunities that technology gives to OC groups to shape facts and narratives; media ownership by organised crime groups and criminal actors; and the ways in which this interplay is situated within the global political economy of offshore finance – including the wider networks of enablers these actors rely on.

Shedding Light on Unchartered Territory

Whilst the literature does not explore the link between OC and IM, it has looked at the links between OCs and terrorism, as well as OCs and politics, and IM and politics. All provide insights for understanding the OC-IM nexus, guiding the direction of this research.

Literature on the OC-terrorism nexus may help to explain motives for OC engagement in IM, albeit with caveats. Increased interactions between terrorist and organised crime groups post- 9/11, amidst the US-led crackdown on sources of terrorist financing, led some researchers to propose the merging of the groups into hybrid criminal-terror organisations.[5] Other researchers however, cautioned against equating the two due to their distinct motives and operational methods.

A common theme emerging from research on the relationship between the two groups is that OC groups are primarily profit-driven (mostly through illicit means), differing from terrorist groups mainly in their lack of ideology. Establishing links between OC and IM, therefore, requires further examination, since the lack of an ideological purpose in OC groups, denotes the absence of a message to propagate.

Further examination of the literature indicates that those involved in the political arena are the primary agents interested in IM. Therefore, a closer look at the relationship between OC groups and politics becomes crucial in understanding OC groups' motives for engaging in IM. The conceptual framework used in this paper, draws from literature examining this relationship as outlined below.

In addition, crucial insights from the literature regarding IM are considered: (1) IM activities (techniques and intensity) are anticipated to

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4   Rocha Menocal, A. (2022, June). Incorporating organised crime into analysis of elite bargains and political settlements: Why it matters to understanding prospects for more peaceful, open and inclusive politics. SOC-ACE Programme, Briefing note No. 21. University of Birmingham. https://www.socaceresearch.org.uk/s/organised-crime-elite-bargains-political-settlements-bn21.pdf

5   Sanderson, T. M. (2004, January). Transnational terror and organized crime: Blurring the lines. SAIS Review, 24(1), 49-61.

be dynamic and subject to change, due to the rapid evolution of communication methods. (2) IM is used by elites with the aim of confusing and misleading the public rather than outright propaganda to change their minds.

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Conceptual framework: Understanding the organised crime-information manipulation nexus

The research adopts insights from Nicholas Barnes' 'political criminality' framework, set out as a way of better understanding criminal violence as a form of. Barnes' notes that OC groups have 'increasingly engaged in the politics of the state… [by developing] variously collaborative and competitive relationships with the state'.[7] However, OCs do not necessarily seek to replace the state or become part of the official administrative apparatus. Barnes suggests four dimensions to distinguish different levels of crime-state engagement: (1) confrontation (high competition between OC groups and the state), (2) enforcement-evasion (low competition), (3) alliance (low collaboration) and (4) integration (high collaboration). Table 1 summarises the implications of these dimensions for the OC-IM nexus, distinguishing between them based on competition and collaboration. The framework also maintains flexibility in categorisation, recognising that actors may transition across various crime-state arrangements.

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6   Hutchinson, S. & O'Malley, P. (2007). A crime-terror nexus? Thinking on some of the links between terrorism and criminality. Studies in Conflict Terrorism, 30(12), 1095-1107

7   Barnes, N. (2017). Criminal politics: An integrated approach to the study of organized crime, politics, and violence. Perspectives on politics, 15(4), 967- 987. ProQuest. 10.1017/S1537592717002110

Table 1: Hypotheses for OC and information manipulation by crime-state arrangement

Crime-state nexus (after Barnes, 2017)	Implications for the OC-IM nexus (hypotheses)
Confrontation (high competition)	In cases of state-OC competition, OC groups are expected to either: refrain from engaging in IM or, if they do engage, manipulate information to the detriment of the state.
Enforcement-evasion (low competition)	
Alliance (low collaboration)	In case of state-OC collaboration, OC groups are expected to manipulate information in a manner that serves the state, either ad hoc or systematically.
Integration (high collaboration)	

The research also draws from Makarenko and Mesquita's research on the so-called OC-terrorism nexus. Tamara Makarenko's influential work characterising the crime-terror nexus as a 'continuum' between which groups can slide, suggests a central point – a 'black hole' syndrome, where the two groups converge in unstable environments.[8] Makarenko and Mesquita further refine this framework, to make a clearer distinction between the paths of the two types of groups.

They propose a dual framework consisting of: (1) an organisational plane – where the authors observe the adoption of techniques by each group from the other and (2) an evolutionary plane – where the authors explore the phenomenon of groups converging into one another.[9] The OC-IM framework accounts for the 'evolutionary plane' in the four levels of crime-state engagement. The 'organisational plane' prompts examination of the tactics shared between the groups.

Finally, the rapid evolution of communication methodologies highlighted in the previous section prompts consideration means that quantity and/or intensity of IM activities needs to be accounted for alongside quality. Therefore, the framework takes a two-dimensional approach to examining the link between OC groups and state-connected actors involved in IM:

- Integration: focusses on the alignment between OC groups and the state, ranging from confrontation to integration. It helps identify the level of cooperation, shared interests, or interdependence between the two entities.

- Intensity: focusses on the varying intensity of activities including disinformation, propaganda, censorship, and selective presentation of facts. It helps to understand the dynamics and patterns of this nexus.

Case studies: Testing the OC-IM Framework

CASE STUDY 01: The intersection of cybercrime and the Russian state

Application of the framework found that the degree of OC integration and the intensity of OC IM activities increased in the lead-up to, and even more after, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for both state-backed/sponsored cybercrime groups and those relatively independent. Russia leveraged 'loose' ties with cybercrime groups to conduct disruptive cyberattacks on Ukraine and advance its global foreign policy objectives, for example, Russia-based ransomware groups and blockchain technology facilitated collections. The Russian state gained plausible deniability through operating in an uncodified and elusive environment.

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8   Makarenko, T. (2004). The crime-terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organised crime and terrorism. Global Crime, 6(1), 129-145. 6. Makarenko, T. & Mesquita, M. (2014). Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union. Global Crime, 15(3-4), 259-274.

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CASE STUDY 02: The role of Evgeny Prigozhin, an OC-linked oligarch, in carrying out IM on behalf of Russia.

In the case of Evgeny Prigozhin, OC integration and intensity of OC IM activities were high before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and increased exponentially thereafter. OC IM activities remained very high whilst Prigozhin's level of integration with Russian state structures went from high collaboration (integration) to high competition (confrontation). Known to be linked to organised crime, Prigozhin operated with a flexible mandate from Putin, to advance the Kremlin's foreign policy goals. His control over media and the means of violence through the state-backed Wagner group gave him considerable power. However, this level of integration strained his relationship with elites, which led to his mutiny and eventual demise, underscoring the mercurial nature of such relationships.

CASE STUDY 03: Media ownership in Transnistria, exemplifying how OC can influence and control politics.

It was found that the intensity of OC IM activities in this case remained very high, whilst OC integration moved from high competition (confrontation) to high collaboration (integration) once OC-linked individuals had consolidated their power in the media landscape. After the Transnistrian war, mobsters Viktor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly led multimillion-dollar corporation Sheriff LLC, controlling all Transnistrian telecoms and TV channel TSV. The channel, holds significant political influence and backs the Republican Party 'Renovation.' The two used their political and media influence to imprison an opposing president for 16 years and continue to use TSV to retain control.

CASE STUDY 04: Media ownership in Russia, illustrating how politics can shape OC-linked media outlets.

The research found that the degree of OC integration went from low-competition (enforcement-evasion) and moderate OC IM activity, when OC-linked oligarchs co-existed with politicians following the fall of the Soviet Union, to complete integration and very high intensity of OC IM activity when Putin became President and took complete control of the information sphere. After the Soviet Union's collapse, OC-linked and oligarch-controlled media played a key role in shaping public opinion and politics in Russia. By 1998, the government expressed concerns about the media landscape, and after Putin's 2000 election win, major media outlets shifted control to the state and Putin-aligned entities, altering Russia's socio-political dynamics.

CASE STUDY 05: Media ownership in Albania, showcasing the interplay and symbiotic relationship between OC and the state.

In contrast to the case studies mentioned above, application of the framework to this case shows that OC integration and intensity of OC IM activity has remained high between the ruling elite and OC since the fall of the Soviet Union to the rise of the Socialist Party, with a relatively balanced, mutually beneficial relationship in play. Media ownership is heavily concentrated in the hands of a few OC-linked "businessmen"- turned-media magnates. The largest commercial channels are owned by families with connections to political elites. Rather than competition or unsettlement, Albania maintains a delicate balance between OC and the state, with a close nexus between politics, business, and media. The rise of online content, declining standards, and a lack of fact-checking contribute to the spread of fake news amongst a public with low media-literacy.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The OC-IM Nexus framework is a valuable tool for understanding the dynamics and potential implications of the complex interplay between OC and IM. The case studies demonstrate its utility in unpacking the levels of integration between OC and state structures, and the varying intensity of the IM employed, at a granular level.

An emerging hypothesis coming out of the research suggests that authoritarian states may wield greater freedom in misusing information when they have intermediate – rather than high – levels of integration with the OC groups executing disinformation campaigns on their behalf. The difference in network strength provides these actors with a significant advantage, enabling them to operate with more opacity and consequently exert greater influence in spreading manipulated information. Probing the nature of the ties between OC and the state constitutes, therefore, another promising avenue for further research.

Several connected avenues for further research also emerge from the findings:

- Understanding public receptivity to IM, could help develop a comprehensive understanding of the broader information ecosystem.

- The mercurial nature of ties between elite actors – particularly oligarchs or 'adhocrats' and authoritarian regimes, exemplified by Evgeny Prigozhin. His IM activity backed by the Kremlin rose as his ties to Russian state structures weakened eventually leading to his demise in August 2023. These complexities highlight the risks of forming 'high integration' connections that expose weakness in the political system. This example provides potential insights for policy responses in fighting authoritarianism.

- Elites involved in OC and IM operate within uncodified spheres by maintaining loose ties to OC groups acting on their behalf and affording them plausible deniability. They use IM to undermine and confuse the public without necessarily changing minds – further broadening their operational landscape.

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